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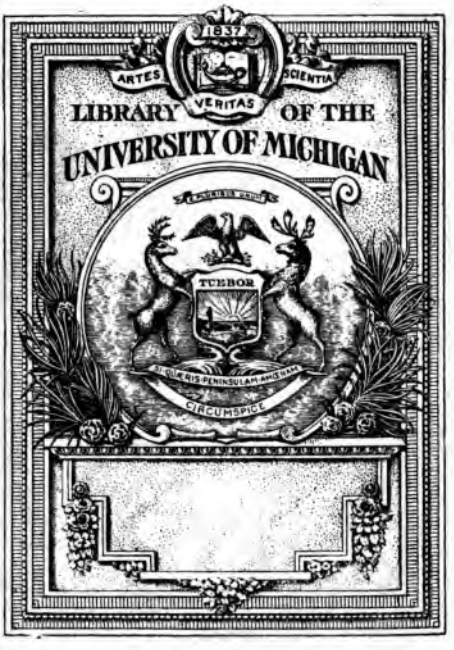
Sears: Administration of public employment bureaus



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"ADMINISTRATION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT BUREAUS"

BY

WALTER LINCOLN SEARS

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1915

"ADMINISTRATION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT BUREAUS." PAPER PREPARED BY SUPT. WALTER LINCOLN SEARS OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT BUREAU FOR THE CONFERENCE, ON "LABOR AND RELATED SUBJECTS," HELD AT SAN FRANCISCO, CAL. DURING THE WEEK OF AUGUST 2, 1915.

Is the principle underlying the creation and operation of a public employment bureau by the government in competition with private enterprise sound?

In considering any question of policy whether governmental, business or social, we should first determine whether or not the fundamental principle is right; and, if we conclude that the principle is right,—our premises correct, the matter of establishing and administration can then be properly considered.

Whether on the broad ground of common sense the idea of public employment bureaus is a practical one—whether, if intelligently carried out, it will confer a direct benefit upon any considerable portion of the community, is the fundamental question. All society it may be said is composed of employers and employees, each of which is continually seeking the other. In the absence of any system for supplying reliable information and grouping of opportunities, each side, in looking for suitable help or employment, must depend largely upon blind personal effort at an expense of time and energy, which might otherwise be devoted to accumulation. This waste, however insignificant, though often large, should be minimized. Anything which tends to concentrate the wants of the buyer and seller of labor and helps to fit them together is necessarily in the interest of economy and public convenience. This principle enters into various commercial organizations which are conducted, not as a private enterprise for profit, but for the mutual good of all those interested in the buying and selling of certain commodities, the members paying their proportionate share for the benefits enjoyed in union of effort. As a labor bureau is provided for the convenience of society as a whole, taxation becomes the fairest and most feasible means of equalizing the expense.

The time consumed by the average wage earner between the loss of one position and the finding of another would, if any means existed of compiling the statistics on the subject, foot up to an enormous amount annually in dollars and cents. Private initiative cannot be relied upon to furnish all possible assistance to the unemployed seeking employment for the reason that it must make merchandise of men's necessities to an extent that is socially harmful even when conducted as a legitimate business and entirely free from extortionate charges.

The government, which is another name for organized society, is each year doing more of those things that were formerly performed by private

enterprise, presumably for the reason that they can be done better in a more disinterested and impartial manner, than by private interests.

History tells us that when this government was first created, all it did was to carry on war and assess the people to meet the expense. Then we had private water companies, toll bridges, highways, etc., and these have gradually been abolished until today the government is satisfactorily performing those functions. There was serious opposition to the establishment of the little red school house, but today we have free text books, compulsory education, public libraries, and the suggestion of the governmental university. In the same manner, the parcel post is a development of the postal system.

There is ample justification for the establishment of these bureaus: first, to "organize the labor market;" second, to make studies by which we may effectively "regularize production;" third, to make studies and perhaps educate employers into the economic importance of engaging placement managers and thus obviate the large "turn over" in their plants and the enormous expense of hiring and firing, and training new employees; fourth, to provide for a vocational guidance bureau under the supervision of a competent vocational counsellor, in the hope of ultimately reducing the increasing number of inefficients, misfits and those in "blind-alley" occupations; fifth, to provide an agency which will effectively eliminate the unemployable from the unemployed; sixth, to provide a "general placement clearing house" where the demand and supply of labor may be centralized and effectively distributed or mobilized, and a disinterested, impartial service be given free to all who are worthy of it. Every intelligent person appreciates these points.

In every large city, each church parish, fraternal organization, and local philanthropic association has its committee on unemployment, all striving to assist the buyer and seller of labor in their endeavors to obtain help or employment, not to mention the licensed private employment agencies who look at the problem from a commercial viewpoint. The result of this scattered and unorganized effort means confusion, duplication, and inefficient public service, with a minimum of accomplishment. With the public employment bureau, practically all of this waste effort would be eliminated, and both the employer in search of competent, reliable and temperate help, and the employee in search of suitable employment are assured a larger measure of efficient service.

The people are each day becoming more and more convinced that the public employment bureau has an important part to play in the government's field of humanitarian endeavor. Private initiative cannot handle this matter of "labor distribution" as economically and as effectively as the government. Both the employer and employee are quick to appreciate the advantage of centralizing their efforts at one general government clearing house, where all kinds of labor may be scientifically handled, as against the obsolete methods

of having hundreds of committees and individuals endeavoring to do this work, in an unorganized unsystematic way.

With the public employment bureau, the employer, if he so desires, can have his wants heralded in more than one hundred and twenty-five public employment bureaus throughout United States and Canada. This service cannot be duplicated by private interests.

When a practical scheme has been developed by a system of bulletins whereby labor conditions will be known all over the country, those who care to know may learn where help or employment may be obtained.

Occasionally, we hear protests from property owners against this added governmental activity, on account of increased taxes. The rent payer and the consumer pay the taxes. The property owner is merely the agent of the people in the assessment, collection and remittance of taxes to the city authorities.

The people demand these things, and are willing to pay the cost. If the property owner doubts it, let him refer these questions to the people for their decision. In all governmental activities or functions, we should consider the public convenience and necessity for the greatest good of the greatest number.

From a huminitarian standpoint, the strong must care for the weak, and by strong I mean those who are strong measured by money, physical strength, social position, or other personal asset. They must care for their less fortunate or weaker brother, and while this is a commercial age, I regret to say an age of too much selfishness, we should not be unmindful of the fact that we owe a duty to society as well as to ourselves. We should not shirk that duty, nor try to shift the burden upon those who are not as capable or strong enough to bear it.

After all is said and done, the success of the public employment bureau, like any other business, depends upon efficient administration.

From the experience of the foreign Public Employment Offices, some of which have been in operation for more than a generation, we should be able to learn a great deal, and adopt such ideas as may be applicable to conditions in this country. American labor conditions are obviously different and we should choose only such methods as are suitable to our needs. We should discourage all plans which might result in making the individual dependent. While it is the duty of the Government to assist the unfortunate individual in every proper way, we ought not to adopt any scheme which would be likely to make him dependent upon the Government or society for support. I favor the giving of information relative to help or employment, but not of any material thing which savors of charity, or tends to pauperize the individual. The methods and practices of the foreign offices, I fear, tend to make the individual dependent, and this should not be permitted to enter into our scheme of furnishing information as to where help or employment may be

obtained. Paternalism has its advantages, and also its disadvantages, but there is a limit which we should not attempt to reach too rapidly.

I do not believe in the term "city or municipal employment agency." I believe the title should be "public employment bureau or office" for the reason that it is a public institution, and applies equally well to the public schools, public libraries, and other public institutions. The term "agency" or "city" or "municipal" or "free" gives it a charity stigma.

In my first Bill, which was introduced nearly twenty years ago in the Massachusetts General Court, to provide for the establishment of these bureaus, it was provided that the municipality should be the unit and I am still of that opinion.

It is agreed that the true function of the Public Employment Bureau is to act as the agent of both employer and employee in an endeavor to obtain competent, reliable and temperate help for the employer, and suitable employment for the unemployed. The institution should be accessibly located in suitably arranged, light and well-ventilated quarters, preferably on the ground floor, with separate entrances for male and female help.

The superintendent and staff should be carefully selected from the classified civil service, and they should possess a knowledge of human nature, have a pleasing personality, initiative, sympathy, tact and good judgment.

The number of branches and the number of departments for the segregation and handling of classified skilled and unskilled, male and female help will largely depend upon the public convenience and necessity of the community or territory to be served.

In all that is done, it should be borne in mind, that it is a *placement*, and not a *relief* bureau.

Quality of *service* to the employing public is another one of the underlying principles;—together they spell permanency and success.

It would be folly to establish a public employment bureau, unless it could be maintained under proper auspices, with the foregoing principles in mind, and with a sufficient appropriation to meet legitimate requirements.

Without question, records should be kept by which to show to the proper authorities and to the public the justification for such an institution. Such records should be as simple as possible, and yet comprehensive.

The people and the authorities have a perfect right to ask "What have you done?" and we should be prepared to tell them honestly.

Some form of record must be kept of an employer's order for help, and I believe that it should contain the following information:

"Employer's Registry Card." Name of individual, firm or corporation, address, business, telephone number, nature or kind of work to be performed, hours per week, preference as to age, religion and nationality, if any, terms and probable duration of employment, sex and number wanted, date received, and symbol of clerk; also name and address of person to be seen. On this

same card, should be entered the name of the applicant, and the date on which he is sent to such employer, and eventually the result, that is, whether or not he is hired. Certain symbols may be used in the result column to indicate whether or not the applicant called on the employer as agreed, or whether or not he reported for duty as agreed with the employer, or whether, or not he is a desirable person to be sent elsewhere. It is generally agreed that a separate record or card should be kept of each class of help requisitioned by each employer. The size and shape of the card, and whether it should be filed horizontally or perpendicularly, is perhaps a matter of individual choice. This blank can be used for any kind or class of help in any community. The "employer's registry card" is filed in numerical order, and this keeps them in chronological order.

The matter of policy with regard to recording the number of persons called for by an employer, is important, and should be considered here. If an employer calls for ten people, it should be ascertained just how many people he really requires. The actual number that he expects and requires should be the record. An excess number may be referred to him for selection. In taking orders for help, uniformity should prevail and I believe in following this rule: "if, from anything that the bureau may say or do, the employer expects service from it, a record of the order should be made." "If, from anything that has been said by the bureau, such employer does not expect service, then a memo. will suffice, and no record need be made." This is a good rule to follow, as has been found from years of experience. At present some offices do not record an order unless they are able to send some one in response to the employer's request, and the order is then made out on the day the person is sent, which obviously is bad business. This is done presumably for the reason that the office desires to be able to show a large percentage of positions filled in proportion to the number called for. This is manifestly unfair, and does not show a true record of the demands made upon the office for service.

A "Ledger Card" or office directory of employers is also important. If the "ledger card" if not used, the "employers registry card" is filed alphabetically.

An "Employee's Registry Slip" should be used by which to record applications for employment. This should be simple and comprehensive, and a minimum number of questions asked, for the reason that the public refuses to be subjected to too much questioning. Great care must be exercised not to give the applicant for work an impression that he is being quizzed too much about personal matters, otherwise you will lose his patronage, and that of others.

Certain pertinent information, from a placement bureau's standpoint, is absolutely necessary.

It is agreed that it is desirable to have the applicant sign his name on the blank as the first operation, for the reasons that it implies an obligation to give truthful answers, and to obtain a correct spelling of the name. A placement clerk should then fill out the rest of the blank in ink, obtaining the following information: Name, address, city or town, nearest telephone number, age, date of birth for juveniles, conjugality, religion, residing at home or boarding out, birthplace, alien or citizen, opportunity, kind of employment or work desired, experience in the opportunity desired, terms of employment, willingness to go out of town, trade unionist, personality, education, language or languages spoken, color or race, number of years, months, weeks and days' residence in country, state and city, cause of unemployment (using U. S. Bureau of Statistics Standards), number of months unemployed preceding application, number of persons actually dependent upon the applicant for support, date of application, and symbol of clerk receiving same. References from two persons, preferably former employers, should be required. A record should be kept on this application of the name of the employer to whom the applicant is sent, the date, and the result, that is, as to whether or not he is employed. Certain symbols may be used in the result column if he has not complied with the rules of the office. This slip or card should also be kept as a continuous record, showing the applicant's transactions with the office. These may be filed alphabetically. An up-to-the-minute card may be used by the placement clerks on which to keep a record of names by occupations of certain classes of help for use when needed promptly. When an applicant is sent to an employer, the "employer's registry card" and the "employee's registry slip" should be attached and so kept until within a reasonable length of time, to learn whether the applicant has been engaged or not, after which they should be detached and filed as previously stated. Obviously, they should be the same shape and filed in the same way (perpendicular or horizontal) that "employer's registry cards" are filed. Perpendicular filing is best for "employer's registry cards" because less area is required.

A "Card of Introduction" is also required by which to give explicit directions to the applicant for work when sending him to a prospective employer. The form mostly used is post-card size, so that it may be signed by the employer and returned, indicating whether applicant has been hired or not.

A "Verification Card" in the absence of the signed "Introduction Card" indicating that the applicant for employment has been hired, has been found to be necessary by which to certify that positions have been filled. In the absence of either this "verification card" or the signed "introduction card" the office is not in possession of written evidence and a complete record and proof of the "number of positions reported filled."

There are a number of other blanks to be considered, but I think it best to consider the five above mentioned, rather than to attempt to take up others at this time.

A position should not be counted as filled unless the office has the evidence to prove it—either the "introduction card" signed by the employer, or a "verification card" made out at the office as a result of investigation.

In the more highly organized offices, about 65 percent of the signed cards from employers who have hired persons, are returned.

OTHER BLANKS.

Employer's order for help
Delinquent Employer's post-card
Public benefactor's card
Bulletin of opportunities
Employee's special application blanks
Advertising cards
Form letters

RULES

Each applicant for employment must give truthful answers to questions asked.

Applicants should treat all information given by the office as strictly confidential and also keep all proper agreements made with employers.

Applicants able to furnish written references from responsible persons will be given preference.

Applicants under the influence of intoxicating liquors or otherwise obnoxious will be refused consideration.

When an applicant accepts a card of introduction to an employer, he must call on such employer and promptly report to this office the result of his interview. He should request such employer to sign and return the card indicating whether or not employment was secured.

Violations of the above rules without satisfactory reasons being given will be considered good cause for denying an applicant the privileges of the office for an indefinite period.

A "labor market letter" should be issued monthly treating of labor conditions in the vicinity of the office, also of its activities, and sent to the daily and weekly press and trade papers, and others who may be interested.

I have always found the press willing to co-operate with the office when given an opportunity to do so.

I have found that the best way to obtain and retain business is through competent solicitors, and quality of service to the public.

With the Public Employment Bureau, the employer must receive first consideration. With the relief agency, the applicant for employment of necessity is considered first. When an employer places an order for help, it is usually an indication that he needs some one at once, and every effort should be made to the end that prompt service is given;—all waste effort should be eliminated.

There is a demand from a certain influential class for figures, and I suppose that just so long as that demand exists, we shall have to supply them.

I believe in obtaining such statistical information as has been found, from the experience of those in charge of these offices, to be absolutely necessary, and such social statistics, by which to make studies of the unemployment problem, provided they can be obtained without humiliation to the applicant for employment.

Doubtless certain statistical information is fundamental and absolutely necessary for the successful operation of the public employment bureau, mainly for the purpose of enabling the placement clerk to make a better selection of help for the prospective employer. Public employment bureau statistics are, to a great extent, misleading, and I know that I will be criticised in some quarters for making this statement, but, any one who is at all familiar with the work of these bureaus, must admit that this is absolutely true.

For example, take the number of employers' applications for help, and the number of persons called for by employers. Admitting that they could be and would be obtained under uniform rules in all the offices throughout the country, these figures would not even be comparable except possibly to show the volume of business and clerical activities. They would not show the actual demand for labor in any given community, for the reason that employers often place their orders for help with several agencies. The rules for taking orders for help and recording the same would not be followed, as those familiar with such details well know.

Suppose an employer placed an order with the office for 50 canvassers or solicitors on a commission basis. Should that be counted as a demand or not? Some offices do not make a record of it, for the reason that the superintendent does not believe that he can fill the order; but, it is a demand just the same as any other demand, even if there is no salary or wages connected with it except the commission. In that respect, your statistics would be of no particular value. Suppose we next take the applications for employment. The first question to consider is: Should we register every individual who applies to the office for work, or should we register only those when we have an opportunity to offer them? And if we register them at all and do not succeed in placing them, but they secure employment elsewhere without our efforts, and then become unemployed and return to the office, should we

register them again, and would that registration count as two persons seeking employment, or as one individual? Certainly, if we should register every applicant for employment, that would not show the amount or extent of unemployment in any given community, for the reason that the same persons may have been registered in other bureaus, and there would be duplication as the result, and the individual would be counted more than once. The figures would not be comparable with previous or corresponding months of previous years. For example, there might be a demand for 500 laborers, we will say, an order which other agencies have also received, and the government bureau might not be able to supply but a small fraction of the demand but in the corresponding month of the succeeding year, a normal demand might be made on the office, which would, so far as statistics go, show a decrease for labor. For this reason, of what value would the statistics be in this particular case? It would not show the amount of unemployment in that community. And I might go on, and show the fallacy of placing too much importance upon public employment bureau statistics.

This is a free country, and not a monarchy, and the self-respecting American citizen will not submit to too much questioning. And then, how would we know that he is telling the truth? There is no legal, although there may be a moral obligation to give truthful answers.

Judicious co-operation should be had with all reliable non-fee placement bureaus, always being careful to keep the bureau free from the charity stigma.

The wisely managed public employment bureau has minimized the number of unscrupulous agencies. The highly specialized mercantile, booking and teachers' agencies may be rendering an important public service at the present time. If the public employment bureau serves its patrons courteously and efficiently, the unscrupulous agency will soon be a thing of the past. In the last analysis, the bureau which renders the highest service will eventually get the business.

The attitude of the employment office, with regard to labor and capital, should be one of *absolute neutrality*. If there should be any strike, lockout, or other labor trouble, the office should receive the order just the same as in any other case, only making note of the fact and keeping a record of it. When the order is given to the placement clerk in charge of the department which is to handle the help requested, he should be made aware of all the conditions. No applicant for employment should be offered a position in such cases or sent out unless the facts are fully stated. The "Introduction Card" should be stamped indicating the fact that there is a labor trouble existing at such place so that if he decides to go, it is with full knowledge of all the conditions. This policy has met with the approval of organized labor and employers, and has stood the test for years.

It has been said that the public employment bureau tends to lower the wage scale. In actual practise, this has been found to be untrue. I have

found from experience that competent and intelligent placement clerks can and do successfully argue with employers for better conditions and wages on the ground that better help can be obtained.

Vocational guidance and placement work is a civic function, which, to my mind, properly belongs to the public employment bureau. Education is one matter, placement is another, and each should be kept separate.

In placement work, our obvious duty is to care first for the competent, reliable and temperate employable.

The care of the unemployable unemployed is more a function for relief or other similar civic organizations. I firmly believe in practical work tests —the rock pile, if necessary, by which to separate the incompetents and unworthies. A meritorious article by William H. Matthews which appeared in the "Survey" of June 12, 1915, conveys my idea. The increasing number of inefficients in our midst is appalling. What shall we do with them? Competition is increasing everywhere, and the willing handicapped applicant for employment fully realizes the conditions. He is rapidly being pushed aside to make room for his more efficient brother. It is a case of the survival of the fittest. In the administration of these bureaus, this is a serious question which must be considered and solved. Organized labor in a sense protects its members to a certain extent from elimination, but what is to become of the army of inefficients who belong to the unorganized class?

The establishment and proper management of free public employment offices would, in my judgment, do much in normal times to reduce the number of idle, shiftless, intemperate, immoral, and criminal. There is no department of the government which could be made as beneficial in its results as the successful establishment and proper management of these offices in co-ordination with the Federal Government; and it would make for a better citizenship and a respect for our laws and civic institutions.

PLAN FOR A CLEARING HOUSE OF NON-FEE EMPLOYMENT BUREAUS.

A clearing house of non-fee employment bureaus would be most advisable, because:

(1) The more monopolistic in its organization the labor market is, the better the service. that can be rendered to both employer and employee.

(2) Each employment bureau, that, through previous experience, locality, clientelle, etc., has been successful in the placement of a special kind of help, can give the advantage of its specialization to the central organization and to each of the other units.

(3) There would be elimination of duplication of work for those in charge of each unit. because employees would not need to be registered at more than one unit. There would be an even greater saving of time and effort on the part of the employee.

(4) A like saving would result to the employer, at the same time giving a better service. It is well known, that many employers give the same order to several different bureaus with a resulting duplication of work, and inefficient service. Under the proposed plan, an employer, by placing an order at the central organization or one of the units, would have the service of all at his command.

(5) It would give a healthy, normal publicity to the Public Employment Bureau through satisfactory service to an ever widening clientelle of employers.

(6) It would give more reliable statistical information regarding unemployment, because of the uniformity of registration, and lack of duplication, and would also give better information for vocational work for the same reasons.

In the organization of such a scheme for the co-ordination of the work of philanthropic employment bureaus, certain points should be kept in mind.

(1) Uniformity of system.

(2) Practicality.

(3) Qualifications of placement clerks.

(4) That the philanthropic employment bureau, as such, is working with the employee from a different point of view than the public employment bureau. With the philanthropic organizations, the applicant for employment seeking relief is the one with whom they are most concerned, and perhaps for this reason the employer is of secondary consideration. With the public employment bureau, the employer must be considered first, for the reason that if he is efficiently served, the bureau can obtain and retain his confidence, to the end that the bureau will continue to receive his patronage. With the public employment bureau, permanency and lasting benefit is of imperative importance.

Eventually, when the confidence of the employer has been obtained, the public employment bureau can assimilate with its regular business a percentage of worthy handicapped and so-called charity cases. Even in such cases, however, the employer should be made aware of all the facts relating to the applicant, so that he may understand that he is not being imposed upon. The usual charity applicant is unfit for the kind of service which is ordinarily demanded by employers, and for this reason, if for no other, the public employment bureau must be especially careful to render the highest service, or it will eventually lose out to other than governmental agencies.

Before organizing such a scheme, there should be a clear understanding of definition of terms used and functions of each unit. A philanthropic employment bureau is one that gives free service to either a restricted or unrestricted number, and is supported by voluntary contributions. A semi-philanthropic employment bureau is one that gives a similar service, and charges a part of the legal fee, and makes up the deficit in its budget through voluntary contribution. These are both non-commercial. A public employment bureau cannot be classified as such, because the employee pays for the service rendered through taxes. On the other hand, it is non-commercial in the sense that the philanthropic employment bureaus are, in that it charges no fee.

Only such philanthropic employment bureaus as charge no fee, either registration or placement, or such semi-philanthropic bureaus as will agree to waive such fees when using the central organization, should become members. This is imperative. A public employment bureau cannot co-operate with a fee agency.

Uniformity of system can be best obtained by the adoption of the use of the registration blanks of the public employment bureau. The same for orders for help, except that only such orders for help as cannot be immediately filled from the local unit should be telephoned or forwarded to the public employment bureau.

In the practical working out of the scheme it should be remembered that it frequently happens that the local bureau cannot fill an order, for the reason that its scope or field of activities is necessarily limited, and no suitable applicant is immediately available. In the same way, the limited number of calls for help in some local bureaus restricts the opportunity for jobs to just that extent. An interchange of information would ovbiate these conditions.

Doubtless a system of bulletins of "Help" and "Situations Wanted" would answer the purpose, or perhaps the information could be telephoned. If the local bureau could handle the situation, there would be no necessity for outside publicity.